Katie O’Brien

Period A2, Wray

2/29/12

Navigational Assist

June 23, 1937

“Damn! The coffee pot ain’t working again,” Dave said from across the room. This would be the third time I’ve heard him shout that out this week. Work used to be the best place I could get a cup of coffee in town, until our coffee maker started pouring out pure water this week. We’ll get some new kid to fix it soon enough.

Interrupting Dave’s rampage, the boss walked in the room with purpose. At once, the room went silent and every man quickly stood up with a firm salute.

“Alright men, good to see you this morning. I have just received word of the next mission that I’ll be sending a good handful of us into. Miss Amelia Earhart will be making a flight that will change the make of this world. She will attempt to be the first woman to fly around the world. I don’t know all the details, but you all will be filled in as soon as I’m informed.”

The volume level in the room elevated with chatter. I for one was silent, in hopes that I would not be chosen. I prayed that boss would take into account that I had just been gone a little over a week ago, on a very similar flight-related mission. Rene would be devastated if I had to take off again.

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The next morning, boss gave us our assignments. I was tense with fear that I would hear my name be called, I listened intently. Boss called out the names, “Frankovitch, Henly, Jackson, Marano, Anderson, Poliday, Boroson, Kitterage, Namson.” I breathed a sigh of relief after not hearing my name called, until I heard the loud voice again. And I couldn’t even imagine having to tell the kids.

“Harkman, report over here!” he called. As I approached, I knew it must be bad. “I would like you to come along as well, as second in command to me. Learn the ropes of the ranks above, I know you’ll lead these men to a successful mission. Your radio skills will be very valuable.” I was given all the details; we were headed out on the Itasca, the Coast Guard’s best cutter, out off the coast of Howland Island. We were to be Earhart’s lifeline as she reached a crucial point in her journey.   
 My mind was racing in a million directions. As a lieutenant, I had to observe that it was my duty to serve my country. But the thought of leaving my family again was enough to make me want to quit. Times were hard, but I loved my job and knew that this would be one of the greatest missions I would ever go on.

At home, the explanation was difficult. It pained the family to watch the broadcasts, as the sight of Ms. Earhart only brought up my leaving.

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July 2nd, 1937

Barely less than two weeks later, I was boarding the Itasca, on our own mini mission to get to Howland Island. I had done my research. Howland Island was a coral atoll, 1,650 miles southwest of Hawaii, but to me, that just sounded like the middle of nowhere. With my bags already on the ship, I headed up the dock for a last goodbye. I saw my wife, Rene, fighting back tears, trying to be strong for the kids, as they had not a clue when I would return. I lifted Emily up into my arms for the last time and heard the last words I would hear out of her mouth until my return. “Bye daddy,” she said quietly as her eyes questioned why I could ever be leaving her. Jonathon looked at me with teary eyes of distrust; his seven year old body had taken enough of watching me leave.

“All Coast Guard members aboard the Itasca,” I heard the captain shout, ending all of the goodbyes. I obeyed the orders with a last wave to my family as I struggled to hide back tears of my own. The familiarity of the Itasca was the only welcoming thing about the trip. I had many times before been stationed on this ship. I knew its ins and outs, and my bunk was starting to feel like an uncomfortable second home. My fellow lieutenants, admirals and officers were like my brothers.

The first few weeks aboard the ship were hell. We simply had to get ourselves from the United States coast to our positioning at Howland. We were indirectly in charge of charting where the Electra was headed and where it had been. Our services were not needed immediately, but we had to be alert of where she was headed and when she would be approaching the checkpoints.

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Right on schedule, Amelia and her navigator, Fred Noonan, reached Lae, New Guinea on June 29th. They had already made nearly their entire trip, having started on the east coast of the US. They had 7,000 miles to go on their trip, the final leg. And we were there to help them, providing navigational and radio links, communications, weather observations and ground servicing. My position was important; we were the make it or break it of the trip. And we had to keep the Electra on course. My nerves were starting to kick in. We had one too many obstacles to deal with: poor radio conditions, a plane being flown by an ill and tired pilot, bad weather, a low fuel supply, and the list of hindrances went on.

“Harkman, you’re aware we’re dealing with a female pilot. And let me tell you, she is way too casual in her approach to safety features and preparation. She’s probably got people doing everything for her,” a fellow radioman remarked.

“That’s what I heard. These women think they can do the same as us. Flying is not a woman’s sport,” I remarked back.

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It was finally time for our job to kick in. On July 2nd, in close contact with the radiomen stationed at Lae, we received word of Amelia’s departure at 00:00 hours GCT. The reports stated that the Electra was equipped with around 1,100 gallons of fuel, which would make her set for 20-21 hours of flying. That would be the heaviest load of fuel ever carried by a plane of that size, making it 50% overloaded. My assurance slightly dropped after hearing the startling statistics, a plane overloaded that much could not be headed into a positive situation. I calculated her flight to Howland to be 18 hours, if everything goes as planned.

I was joyous, as the first few hours went by swimmingly, on both of our parts. The Itasca team was doing very well, and our radio signals were surprisingly strong. We received signals from the Ontario, a US Navy auxiliary tug, who was positioned halfway between Lae and Howland. And though the Ontario was not equipped with high frequency radio equipment, we we’re able to read their positioning well and were pleased at the success of the Electra passing a checkpoint.

Our fingers were crossed as we heard another radio signal come in at 7:20 hours GCT. The signal was Amelia giving us a positioning report. She had just flown over Nakumanu Island, another important checkpoint, approximately 1/3 of the way to Howland, with no good news. Though she was on course, we detected that headwind speeds were increasing and we sent a radio signal to the Electra alerting them of the increased speeds, but received no signal in return. This marked a crucial point in the trip. If Amelia wanted to turn around and return to Lae, she must return now or she would be soon beyond the point of safe return.

At approximately 8:00 hours GCT, Amelia made her last radio contact with Lae, leaving the rest of the navigation solely up to us. She was on course for Howland, flying at 12,000 feet. We received several short transmissions from the Electra, but were not able to fix the exact location. At 14:15 hours GCT, the Electra was approximately four hours from Howland Island. Luckily the fuel consumption was on target, but the headwinds had not slackened. Another sigh of relief was heard by the entire control room, as headwinds and fuel consumption were two of our main concerns. I, for one, was glad that I was not monitoring those stations, as it would prove to be way to much stress for me.

Running in from the other control room at 17:15 hours, Admiral Shelton screamed terrifying news, “The Electra’s last fuselage tank has run empty. She made a quick decision and switched to run off the last main wing tank, which only has 97 gallons left in it.” After the announcement, the mood in the room shifted. The level of focus greatly increased, along with the panic level. The fuel concerns also greatly increased, as every man knew that the rest of the trip was riding on these last 97 gallons of fuel.

I really began to worry when we received no voice signals from the Electra at 18:00 or 18:30, as we had established both of these times as vital check-in times. This started the escalating fear in the room, as we had no way of knowing what was wrong or why the Electra would not be communicating with us. It could be anything. So we carried on and stuck to our “hope for the best” attitude, which was greatly diminishing.

Our radio signals detected a descent of the Electra at 18:33 hours GCT, when the plane was 65 miles outside of Howland Island. My heart skipped another beat. We were so close to getting Amelia here, but a descent at this point meant trouble. We estimated that the last main wing tank, which was all Amelia had to run on, was slightly over half full of fuel, but we had no radio bearings directly from the Electra for confirmation of our assumption.

My heart was racing and I was running on pure adrenaline and caffeine at this point. We all felt that we were losing her, but were desperately trying to detect her signals. At 19:12 hours, she sent a signal saying she saw no island in sight, when she clearly should have. It felt as if the room’s hope level just crashed. How could she not see us? She had to be almost right on top of us.

The head of navigation, Lieutenant Mendelson had the next announcement, “The Electra has flown along the 157-337 line for 40 minutes, meaning that they must have already passed east or west of the island. We are in need of a radio direction-finder bearing, but that is not an option right now. The time is 19:28 hours. I repeat 19:28 hours.” After our radios being able to keep up with us for the entire trip, the slip up of the Electra’s radios caught us off guard. Amelia and Noonan’s radio should have been able to clearly communicate with us for the entirety of the trip.

At 19:30 hours GCT, we finally were able to receive a transmission from the Electra at max strength, which sent a tingle of hope into the eyes of each and every man aboard as we intently listened.

“0742 KHAQQ Cling calling Itasca. We must be on you but cannot see you. Gas is running low. We’ve been unable to reach you by radio. We are flying at altitude 1,000 feet.”

After receiving the signal, we tried to radio back four times. We estimated that the Electra had about a quarter tank of fuel remaining, meaning that they had 35-40 minutes to find the island, which did not seem very likely, as they could not see the island twenty minutes ago either. At this point she must be within 50 miles north or south of the island and 20 miles east or west. Amelia kept retracing her flight, with no luck. At 20:13 hours GCT, we received the very last radio voice transmission of positioning data, with no useable information. Our head of radio continued to transmit on all frequencies to the Electra until 21:30 hours GCT.

“She must have ditched at sea.”

“Maybe she disengaged auto pilot. A reach for the control wheel?”

“Her engines must have failed.”

“She must have finally run out of fuel.”

“It was probably Noonan. He was not a good navigator; always let things go too far.”

A million thoughts ran through my mind, and I was one of the only ones who didn’t join the heated discussion taking place in the conference room. Instead, I made my way back to my bunk. I pulled out the pictures of my wife and kids I had stashed under my pillow. I looked into their eyes and knew that I would be home again soon.

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Attribution of Research

1. "The Last Flight." *Ellen's Place*. Web. <http://www.ellensplace.net/ae\_lflt.html>.

* Reached Lae, New Guinea on June 29th
* 7,000 miles to go
* Itasca standing off Howland Island
* Left Lae at 00:00 hours GMT on July 2nd
* Electra had fuel for 20-21 hours of flying
* 7:20 hours Amelia provided position report, 20 miles south of Nakumanu Islands and on course
* Headwind speed increases
* Not known if she received report
* 8:00 GMT: last radio contact with Lae
* On course for Howland Island at 12,000 feet
* Several short transmissions received by Itasca, too brief to fix location
* 19:30 GMT, transmission at max strength
* Itasca continued to transmit on all frequencies until 21:30 GMT
* Determined that Amelia must have ditched at sea

1. "The Legend of Amelia Earhart's Disappearance." *The National Air and Space Museum*. 19 Aug. 2010. Web. <http://blog.nasm.si.edu/2010/08/19/the-legend-of-amelia-earhart%E2%80%99s-disappearance/>.

* US Coast Guard Cutter Itasca
* Provided navigational and radio links

1. Long, Elgen M., and Marie K. Long. *Amelia Earhart: The Mystery Solved*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1999. Print.

* Heaviest load of fuel ever carried, 50% overloaded
* 1,100 gallons of fuel for the 18 hour flight
* Itasca provided communications, radio direction-finding, weather observations, ground servicing
* Ontario: US Navy auxiliary tug
* Nakumanu Island: 1/3 of the way there, no good news
* If return to Lae, had to return or beyond point of safe return, strong headwinds
* 14:15 GMT: 4 hours from Howland Island
* Headwinds not slackened, fuel consumption on target
* 17:15 GCT: last fuselage tank ran empty, switched to run off last main wing tank loaded with 97 gallons
* Hadn’t received any voice signals from Itasca during 18:00 or 18:30 GCT schedule
* 18:33 GCT: descent, 65 miles out of Howland Island
* No radio bearings for guidance, fuel slightly over ½ full
* 19:12 GCT: no island in sight
* 19:28 GCT: flown along 157-337 line for 40 minutes, must have already passed E or W of island
* Needed a radio direction-finder bearing
* 4 tries to radio, with less than ¼ tank remaining
* Within 50 miles N or S, and 20 miles E or W of island
* Disengaged autopilot, reached for control wheel
* Engines quit

1. Lovell, Mary S. *The Sound of Wings: The Life of Amelia Earhart*. New York: St. Martin's, 1989. Print.

* Noonan let things go too far, not a good navigator
* Amelia too casual in approach to safety features and preparation, had people to do it for her
* “07:42 KHAQQ (calling) Itasca we must be on you, but cannot see you. But gas is running low, been unable to reach you by radio. We are flying at altitude 1,000 feet.”

1. McNamee, Gregory. "The Disappearance of Amelia Earhart." *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. Encyclopedia Britannica, 2 July 2007. Web. <http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2007/07/the-disappearance-of-amelia-earhart/>.

* July 2nd, 1937
* Howland Island: coral atoll, 1,650 miles SW of Hawaii